

The Costs of Sprawl

Sprawl costs us all. The Ontario government is pushing ahead with more than \$10 billion worth of new and expanded highways across the province over the next 10 years.

Highways actually increase dependency on cars: the more road capacity that is built, the more drivers respond by driving. Each new highway constructed with the promise of alleviating traffic congestion is followed only by new sprawl and further highway use. In general, gridlock will return to a highway within five years of expansion, requiring more highways to be built, and the cycle continues. But the financial burden of all these highways is astronomical.

Community Costs

- Highway development involves various costs, including planning and design, land acquisition, and construction costs. Road construction costs (grading and paving, not including planning and land costs) typically range from \$250,000 per lane-mile in “easy” conditions up to \$2,500,000 per lane-mile in “difficult”. Intersections also add significant costs. Rural intersections typically cost \$2 million to \$4 million, while a standard urban interchange typically costs \$10 million to \$15 million for construction, plus planning and land costs. Highway costs all-told then average \$11 million/mile in rural areas and \$49.4 million in urban areas. So much for the term “freeway”!
- One third of car costs are paid by society at large (via general tax revenues) rather than the drivers themselves (via license and fuel taxes). Paying for our national system of highways and roads requires an extra \$4.6 billion each year from general tax revenues. That would buy a lot of light rail systems and bicycle lanes.



- Other costs from heavy reliance on driving include: smog damage to crops and buildings; climate change; water, air and noise pollution; pollution from improper disposal of batteries, tires, etc.; and travel delays from increased congestion. These hidden costs are estimated at \$34.2 billion per year in Canada. Pro-rated to Ontario: \$12 billion per year.
- When health care costs, property losses and other factors are considered, the economic cost of traffic collisions to Ontarians is as high as \$9 billion annually. Transit, on the other hand, makes a major contribution to road safety in Canada, with a rate of fatal collisions per passenger km that is about 5% of car travel.
- It costs an average of \$7,500 per year to maintain one km. of two-lane paved roadway, not including snow and ice control.
- Expanding roads encourages more dispersed, automobile-dependent development patterns, which increases The costs of providing public services (water, sewage, garbage, emergency response, school).



Costs to the Individual

- Parking adds more than \$600 to the cost of a home, and \$1200 to the cost of an apartment. Add to that unpriced on- and off-street parking, and this represents a total cost of about \$1,500 per vehicle/year – a hefty subsidy to car drivers.
- Owning and operating a car costs between \$8 and \$14 thousand dollars per year, depending on size of vehicle and distance traveled. Many people would choose to spend that on a new bicycle and annual transit pass if such facilities were convenient, safe and comfortable. Unfortunately, for many, these options are not available.
- Inactivity leads to disease. An estimated 850,000 people are diagnosed with diabetes in Ontario – including one in nine adults in Toronto – and the numbers are growing. So, too, are the numbers of people with crippling and life-threatening complications that come with the disease: heart attack, stroke, kidney failure, blindness and amputations. The overwhelming majority suffer from type 2 diabetes, considered preventable by exercise and access to good food. This disease is threatening to overwhelm our health-care system. Prevention is key.



- People in low traffic streets have far more friends and acquaintances than those in high traffic streets. High volume, speeding traffic causes people to retreat from street-based community.
- \$1 million invested in public transit creates 21.4 new jobs. A similar investment in the automotive industry creates 7.5 jobs, while the petroleum industry yields just 4.5 jobs.



In summary, the costs associated with highways and sprawl, including construction, pollution, crashes, health care, noise and congestion, are enormous. Clearly highways are an environmental, fiscal and social disaster that would not pass any value-for-money test.

Spending less on highways and investing in more cost effective alternatives like mixed-use urban design, mass transit, pedestrian zones and increased densities would save significant amounts of money for cash strapped governments and individuals alike. Every Ontario taxpayer should be asking this question: How might we better spend that \$1 billion spent annually on Ontario's highways?

What You Can Do

Let the Minister of Transportation (Jim Bradley: jbradley.mpp@liberal.ola.org) and the Minister of Energy and Infrastructure (George Smitherman: gsmitherman.mpp@liberal.ola.org) know what you think about continued highway expansion. You might include the following:

- *No New Highways* in Ontario because they only bring more suburban sprawl development, air pollution, climate change, crashes and public expense.
- Invest instead in *smart growth*, which includes mixed land use, mass transit, transit- and pedestrian-oriented development, and active transportation (cycling, walking, etc.)

Send copies of all correspondence to the Ontario Smart Growth Network (contact@smartgrowth.on.ca)



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